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ABSTRACT

There is a growing recognition of the way in which instruction can be enriched by engagement with narrative, and teachers can learn much from studying interactions between parents and children where the activity seems unforced and enjoyable and where parent and child seem most in harmony. Such a pair are three-year-old Anna and her mother, who is reading the child a familiar story. An examination of the patterning of the story reading in terms of discourse analysis and narrative structure shows that the 39 conversational utterances (there are only two sentences of printed text in the story) that may appear random or disorderly to the casual observer actually have a coherence within their own physical context. Anna is the one who decides what shall be talked about, but her mother supports Anna's initiatives in a way that shifts the discourse towards the explicitness and formal completeness of written language. As they talk, they are both concerned in realizing the narrative, in actualizing the potential narrative structures and in building a complex, textured and coherent whole. The conversation provides Anna with an external model for the internal conversation with the author that is necessary if she is to make the narrative texts she encounters more firmly her own. A transcript of the audiotape is provided, with a concurrent description of the story's text and illustrations. (NKA)

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A Three Year Old Making Sense of Narrative through Conversation

Henrietta Dombey

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As a teacher (and teacher of teachers) of young children I have long been interested in children's experiences of hearing stories read aloud. In this paper I use the tools of discourse analysis and structuralist theory to examine a three year old child's initiation into narrative through the medium of a bed-time story.

The ability to construct and construe narrative is a cultural product taking different forms in different societies and social groups. Young children come to school differing widely in their experience of oral and written narratives and consequently in their ability to make sense of the stories we tell and read to them, and in their competence in telling stories of their own. There is a growing recognition of the way in which school learning can be enriched by engagement with narrative, but if we are to ensure that all children are fully involved in such activity we need to provide appropriate experience in nursery and kindergarten, particularly for those whose home experience of narrative has not included written texts.

Teachers of such young children now recognise increasingly how much they have to learn from parents of all social classes in terms of oral language development. Practices which in the home are guided by intuition and a desire to build a world of shared meaning can be most productively adapted to the classroom. I suggest that this is true also of early experience of written language. However in this case, the experience is not so evenly distributed among homes in different social classes. Teachers can perhaps learn most from studying interactions between parents and children where the activity seems least forced, most enjoyable and where parent and child seem most in harmony. My paper examines one such story reading in this spirit, in the hope that we can develop some new and productive ways of thinking about story reading to very young children in school.

Henrietta Dombey
April 1986

A THREE YEAR OLD MAKING SENSE OF NARRATIVE THROUGH CONVERSATION

It is now widely recognised that a child's initiation into the complex process of learning to read can start most richly with listening to stories read aloud (Holdaway 1975, Scollon and Scollon 1979, Meek 1982). Interpreted in psycholinguistic terms, the listening child is developing a familiarity with the meanings and linguistic forms of printed texts which will materially assist her in later attempts to read, that is to make sense of written texts on her own. Through her experience of stories read aloud, she is developing a store of useful 'information in the head' to use Smith's term, that will enable her to be less dependent on the 'information on the page' (Smith 1971). In sociolinguistic terms she is learning something of the functions that written language can perform, something of what Halliday calls the 'functional extension' that written language can provide (Halliday 1978). But exactly what happens in such 'listening' sessions has not been thoroughly explored.

It is true that Heath in her celebrated documentation of the literacy events involving young children of a white middle-class community with college-educated parents, and those of black and white working class communities, has written of the importance of story-reading in the middle class 'Maintown' homes (Heath 1982). In particular she has drawn attention to the 'life-to text' and 'text to life' moves whereby these 'Maintown' children are helped to establish connections between their own first-hand experience and the second-hand experience of the book. But her emphasis is on cultural differences rather than a detailed articulation of the means by which cultural practices are achieved.

I want to examine in terms of discourse analysis and narrative structure, the patterning of a story reading between a parent and child in a home similar to those of 'Maintown' in its social class.

educational background and expectations of literacy. I want to suggest that such a story reading is a complex social interaction through which the child is learning how to make 'readings' of a narrative text.

Anna is three and a half and her mother is reading her Pat Hutchins' Rosie's Walk which Anna has heard four times before. There are only two sentences in the printed text but, as you will hear, the reading of these is surrounded and interspersed by 39 conversational utterances. This conversation is not random or disorderly but has its own boundaries. The announcement of the title at the beginning and the reference to bed-time at the end function as a frame, setting limits on what is said. Within these limits the conversation has a coherence although this may not be apparent initially. I want to suggest that the form of this coherence has a function namely to permit Anna to make sense of the narrative.

Here then, is the tape.

On first hearing, this conversation seems far from orderly. Many of the exchanges between mother and child lack the formal completeness of exchange structure models such as those proposed by Coulthard and Brazil or Berry (Coulthard and Brazil 1981, Berry 1981). Not one exchange has the complete Inititiation, Response and Feedback format identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). Indeed of the fifteen exchanges in this reading, only nine include a verbal response as well as an initiation. The remaining six are one part 'exchanges', but of course Anna and her mother are face to face and share the same physical context; actions, gestures and facial expressions complete many of these apparently incomplete exchanges. Her mother needs no verbal response when she asks Anna to hurry up. Indeed in no instance does a one part 'exchange' seem to leave a semantic incompleteness. Coherence comes from the intermingling of words and paralinguistic communication, not from the words alone.

To examine the structure of their conversational interaction in more detail I draw on the framework developed by Wells and Montgomery for describing exchange structure (Wells and Montgomery 1981). In this framework each conversational move is typified both interpersonally, that is in terms of the discourse role adopted by the speaker, and ideationally, in terms of the commodity being exchanged. So we are looking at the patterning, both of the roles taken by Anna and her mother, and of what it is they are talking about.

When we look at the inter-personal patterning of the exchanges we see that it is Anna who is taking the leading role. Anna initiates ten of the fifteen exchanges. She may be the novice in the matter of story-reading, but she is the one who decides what shall be talked about. This is a striking repetition of the interactive patterning found by Trevarthen to typify pre-speech communication between babies and their adult caretakers, and by Wells to be characteristic of conversational interaction between rapid language learners and their parents (Trevarthen 1979, Wells 1981).

To Anna's initiatives her mother acts as supporter rather than bystander, extending seven of these into verbally complete exchanges which follow the rules of reciprocity. Anna is less generous: of her mother's five initiations only one is granted a verbal response. Of course, embedded as these exchanges are in a shared physical context, as I have suggested, their lack of verbal completeness does not necessarily mean a failure to communicate. On the other hand a high proportion of verbal completion surely shows a movement towards verbal self-sufficiency. Anna's mother treats her initiatives in a way that shifts the discourse towards the explicitness and formal completeness of written language.

This movement towards written language is also evident in the ideational structuring of the discourse. The only exchange whose commodity is not information occurs before the story title has been

announced. In all the rest the commodity is information and with the exception of the final exchange, the information is all story-related.

Not only is there consistency of topic, there is also a more particular continuity in many of these story-related exchanges. Out of the total of fifteen, nine are grouped together in sequences of two or three exchanges where the initiation of the second and subsequent exchange is contingent on a proposition constructed in the preceding one. This development of story-related information results in a thematic consistency that seems rare in conversations involving young children. Mother and child are not flitting from topic to topic but constructing a series of related propositions.

These exchanges are, of course, centred on a narrative text. As they talk, Anna and her mother are concerned here not to establish connections with Anna's first-hand experience, (although this often plays a part in their readings) but to realize the narrative, to actualize its potential narrative structures and to build a complex, textured and coherent whole. In this story-telling this involves close interpretation of the pictures, for the printed text of Rosie's Walk is deceptively uneventful, but the richer story, sharp with the constant threat to the innocuous hen of being pounced on and eaten by the unmentioned fox, is to be found in the pictures alone. To use Barthes' terms, the comments of both mother and child focus on the kernel events of the fox following Rosie and his desire to eat her; they ignore the satellite events of the frog on the lily pad and the goat by the hay (Barthes 1975). Outside the story context these pictures could be read in many other ways, but mother and child are reading them for a complex purpose - to establish the story and to actualize the hermeneutic code of this verbal and visual narrative.

In doing so they are not using the stance of the narrative text. The sure voice of Genette's classical subsequent narration has been

replaced by the tentative voice of the spectator who feels an excited uncertainty about the outcome of the events she is witnessing (Genette 1980). Their comments represent the actions and characters as operating in the present not the past: what is in the picture is happening now, whereas what is in the verbal narrative has already happened. The ever present sense of uncertainty about what might happen next is in marked contrast of the immutable certainty of the narrative. Mother and child seem to be concerned not simply to establish an invariant story, but also to construct a fictive world containing possibilities that extend beyond the invariant story of the spoken narrative. As they look at the pictures their intention seems to be to construe them not simply in order to identify elements in the story, nor just to supply elements missing from the verbal narrative. They seem instead to construe them in order to articulate a world where many things might happen. Anna's mother says with apparent conviction:

I think he's going to get her this time

Mother 35

despite the fact that she has read the story to Anna many times before and both know that the fox will be perpetually frustrated in his attempts to catch Rosie. Anna reveals a similar concern with the possible story future rather than the certain story past when she asks whether the fox is able to get out of the hay. At the end she announces firmly that the fox can't get Rosie in her cage.

Through their conversational talk mother and child are creating a story world and moving about inside it, making judgements on its elements and exploring its possibilities and laws. Within this world there are many things to talk about and as other readings of this story indicate, the topics chosen vary from one reading to the next. At each reading they construct a different 'reading'. Yet where they talk of what might happen, their speculations are bounded by the

limitations of the story world of this particular genre. There is no suggestion that the fox might get bored, that Rosie might get run over by the lorry from the egg marketing board or that the farmer might eat her for supper. For in this genre the characters behave autonomously and consistently, the significant events that take place are the outcome of this behaviour and the social and mechanical complexities of the modern world are, by and large, kept at bay.

We cannot know in detail the extent to which the potential structures of the narrative are actualized for Anna. But an examination of the conversational utterances has shown us her concern to articulate the set of kernel events, to savour the hermeneutic tension, and not to overstep the bounds of the genre.

All this has taken place in conversational exchanges principally initiated by Anna, but in which her mother plays a vital, if self-effacing role. Anna's mother does far more than deliver to her the words of the narrative although her manner of doing this and in particular her use of intonation is of key importance in giving it life. But if this were all that mattered, Anna would be better served by tapes of stories read by justly celebrated actors than by a hurried reading by a mother who wants her own supper. However this personal reading is providing Anna with something no tape can give. For Anna's mother prompts, supports and extends her enquiries, enabling Anna to make the narrative her own.

Paradoxically the loose and shifting structures of conversation permit mother and child to actualize the tighter and more complex structures of narrative. The discourse structures Anna is familiar with and in which she plays the leading role, serve to elaborate and articulate the less familiar structures of the narrative, where her mother has control of the discourse. What is new is not merely juxtaposed with what is familiar: it is through the familiar that the new is given its coherence and significance and enters Anna's

possession.

Anna is being initiated into the process of reading as a process of active meaning construction in which the reader makes a personal sense of whole texts. The text, of course is markedly different from informal conversation and demands very different kinds of meaning making. Yet her mother makes no attempt to disentangle the various levels of linguistic and literary understanding of which such meaning making is composed. At one and the same time she is enlarging Anna's sense of the kinds of propositional meanings of which stories are composed, accustoming her to the narrow formality of the interpersonal meanings conveyed from writer to reader and extending her repertoire of the distinctive lexical and syntactic forms that realize these in narrative text. There is no pre-learning of the vocabulary, no preliminary session with adverbial phrases, nor any exclusive attention to the sequence of events per se. Their conversational interaction concerns none of these. Instead all this learning of new forms and meanings seems to take place unobtrusively. The new forms are certainly not the object of their conscious attention. Their talk is organised and ordered by a central purpose, which is to produce, celebrate and give personal meaning to a whole narrative that brings its own semantic reward. Anna's mother acts on the expectation that this activity will be enjoyable to Anna, and that a determination to savour each story will drive Anna to make sense of the new forms as she constructs the new meanings. Her mother does not see her job to be ensuring either that Anna has 'understood' each new word or structure, or that she can give a literally faithful account of the events of the story. Indeed there is an implicit assumption that to do any of these things would be to distract attention from the central activity.

The denotation (and connotation) of the lexis, the meaning relations realized in the syntax and the event structure of the story,

matter only in terms of their contribution to the narrative Anna is constructing in her head. And there is no one correct internal narrative. What matters is that within the limits set by the text Anna should construct something pleasing to herself and that this pleasure should be shared between mother and child. That Anna sees a richer understanding as more rewarding is evidenced by the questions she asks. And the explanations that her mother provides are in response to such questions: they are not items on a didactic agenda whose completion will indicate a correct reading of the text.

Re-reading will deepen Anna's understanding of narrative wholes and of their parts, of functions and of their forms, and make each narrative more firmly her own. As she comes to know a number of texts very well indeed and to apprehend (albeit intuitively) the relationship between the forms and meanings of which they are composed, she will be able to make satisfying sense of more complex texts and demand fewer re-readings. But all this learning is likely to be characterised by simultaneous and unconscious attention to a number of different linguistic and literary levels.

Her mother's mediation, through her use of intonation and her responses to Anna's initiations, will assist Anna to conquer this new territory. As Anna's familiarity with new forms and new meanings develops, this mediation will become less necessary. It is likely already that Anna is using her familiarity with other stories to help her gloss new ones: familiar forms in new combinations help her construct new meanings familiar meanings help her make sense of new forms. As she hears more stories she will have a richer stock to draw on and will be less in need of the mediation provided by a known and trusted adult. And with each new narrative her sense of the whole will be developed more from her own internal dialogue than from external dialogue with an experienced reader. But in all the stages of her progress towards a richer experience of narrative, she will

proceed along a broad front organised by her intention to 'understand the story'. If the activity is to be intrinsically rewarding this is how she must go about it. For an adult to abstract one element from the narrative and 'teach' it to Anna would be to rob her of the pleasure of making the narrative her own. To borrow Rumelhart's description of reading, the process Anna is engaged in is simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing (Rumelhart 1976).

The conversation with her mother provides Anna with an external model for the internal conversation with the author that is necessary to any but the most superficial reading of a narrative text. Thus her mother helps Anna to do in partnership what she cannot yet do for herself. In her actions, she implicitly shares the view embodied in Vygotsky's much quoted observation.

> What the child can do in co-operation today, he
>
> can do alone tomorrow
>
> (Vygotsky 1962 p. 104)

Perhaps Anna might have achieved an internal conversation on her own. Perhaps interaction with a skilled reader is not the only route to interactive reading. But it certainly appears to be an effective route for Anna, enabling her to make the narrative texts she encounters move firmly her own.

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Rosie's Walk Pat Hutchins

(Third of three stories that session)

			1
1	M	C'mon 'cos I want to go	ROSIE'S WALK
		and have my supper.	By PAT HUTCHINS
2		Hurry up.	*Picture of carefree hen*
3		Rosie's Walk	*walking through cluttered rural scene, followed by watchful fox*
			Cover
4		Rosie the hen went for a walk	*Picture of hen setting out across picturesque farmyard*
5	A	A fox is following her.	*with fox eyeing her greedily*
6	M	Oh!	*from under hen-house*
			2
			Rosie the hen went for a walk
			1 - 2
7		Across the yard	*Picture of hen walking past fruit trees, unaware of fox jumping after her*
			across the yard
			3 - 4
8		Boum *****	*Picture of hen walking on unaware while fox bumps his nose on rake he has landed on*
			5 - 6
9		Around the pond,	*Picture of hen walking beside*
10	A	***** fish	*pond, unaware of fox jumping after her. No fish in picture.*
		in the pond	around the pond
			7 - 8

11	A	Splash!	*Picture of hen walking on*
12		How they, how the fox	*unaware of fox landing in*
		just don't get out?	*the pond. No fish in picture*
13	M	Oh I expect he'll climb	*9 - 10*
		out.	
14	A	Why?	
15	M	Why will he climb out?	
16	A	Yeah.	
17	M	Well, why d'you think	
		he'll climb out?	
18	A	Like when he wants,	
		when he, the hen to eat.	
19	M	Yes he wants to eat	
		Rosie.	
20	M	Over the haycock,	*Picture of hen walking over*
21	A	Is, is he catching her?	*haycock unaware of fox*
			right behind her
			over the haycock
			11 - 12
22	M	er *turns page* no	*Picture of hen walking away*
23	A	Wh why?	*from haycock unaware of fox*
24	M	(Laughter) 'cos he's a	*buried in it*
		silly old fox, that's why	*13 - 14*
25	A	'cos he's gone in the	
		hay.	
26	M	Gone in the hay.	
27	A	Could he get out?	
28	M	um, Yes.	
29		Past the mill.	*Picture of hen walking past*
30	A	He's doing that, doing that	*mill unaware of catching her*
31	M	Is he?	*foot in pulley rope, and of*
			fox following her
			past the mill
			15 - 16

32	M	*turns page* Aah!	*Picture of hen walking on*
33		She doesn't even notice	*unaware of fox submerged*
		him, does she?	*in flour behind her*
			17 - 18
34		Through the fence,	*Picture of hen walking through*
35		I think he's going to	*gap in fence unaware of fox*
		get her this time.	*jumping behind her*
36	A	Why?	through the fence
37	M	Looks like that, don't you-	*19 - 20*
38	A	like that	
	M	Know, don't you think so?	
39	A	Think he's going out.	
		(excited laughter)	*Picture of hen walking on*
			unaware of fox landing in
			farm cart behind her
			21 - 22
40	M	Under the beehive,	*Picture of hen walking on*
41		Errr	*under behives unaware of*
	A	(laughter)	*fox in runaway cart tumbling*
			beehives behind her
			under the beehives
			23 - 24
42	A	She's even away	*Picture of hen walking on,*
			unaware of tumbled beehives
			behind her, and fox
			running away pursued by bees
			25 - 26
43	M	And got back in time	*Picture of hen entering*
		for dinner.	*hen-house*
44	A	D'you know the fox	and got back in time for
		can't get Rosie hen in	dinner
		in in her cage.	*27*
45	M	No.	
46		No that's why hens sleep	
		in them	

47 M They're called hen coops

48 And, and that's why hens sleep in them, so that foxes can't get them.

49 So they're nice and safe.

50 Bye-bye Rosie!

51 Mummy's suppertime now.